

# How Parliament works

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If you have watched British television at all over the last six weeks, you will not have failed to notice that the country has been preparing for a general election. The hype is finished now and it's time to settle down to some sort of normality. A question I get asked quite often is how does Parliament work. Let me try to explain.

## What is Parliament?

The United Kingdom Parliament consists of the Queen, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. All three work together to carry out the work of Parliament. The work of Parliament covers seven main areas: making laws (legislation), examining the work of government, controlling finance, protecting the individual, examining European proposals, debating current affairs and hearing appeals.

## What is government?

Some people confuse Parliament with the government. All members of government belong to Parliament, but not all Members of Parliament belong to government. In total there are more than 1,800 people entitled to sit in the two Houses of Parliament; nearly 1,200 in the House of Lords and 651 in the House of Commons. Only about 100 of these members belong to government. Members of the government usually belong to one of the Houses of Parliament, to enable Parliament to keep a check on their work by asking questions and debating.

The most senior members of the government are known as the Cabinet. In most Cabinets, the majority of the members are drawn from the House of Commons and only a few from the House of Lords.

## The House of Commons

There are 651 members of Parliament, or MPs, who sit in the House of Commons. They are the elected representatives of the people of the United

Kingdom, and the area they represent is known as a constituency. Some members refer to their constituency as their "seat." A member of Parliament represents all the people who live in the constituency, regardless of how they voted.

## House of Lords

Currently, there are more than 1,200 members of the House of Lords. These can be divided into four main types of lords – bishops, lords who inherit their titles, lords who have been given titles for their own lifetime and law lords who mainly hear appeal cases. The House of Lords is the highest court of appeal for most types of legal cases in this country. The House of Lords is directly descended from the Medieval King's Council to which were summoned the great nobles and churchmen.

## Bishops (also called Lords Spiritual)

The early councils contained a large number of important churchmen. Today, only 26 bishops of the Church of England remain in the House of Lords. The Church of England is the state church, or the established church in England. The archbishops of Canterbury and York are automatically members of the House of Lords, as are the bishops of London, Durham and Winchester. The next 21 in order of seniority are also entitled to sit in the House of Lords. Unlike other Lords, the bishops and archbishops are only members of the House for as long as they hold office. When they retire, they leave the House.

## Hereditary peers

All the lords who are not bishops are known as peers or Lords Temporal. There are nearly 800 hereditary peers who can pass on their titles to their children. Half of the hereditary peerages have been created in the 20th century, but by the 1960s the idea that seats in the House of Lords should be inherited had become rather unpopular. After 1965, no new hereditary peerages were given for 18 years, and only a few were awarded in the 1980s. Those who receive new hereditary peerages are called hereditary peers of first creation.

## Life peers

Since 1958, more than 600 people have been made life peers and given a seat in the House of Lords for their own lifetime. They cannot pass on their titles to their children. The titles are bestowed by the queen, but the selection is made by

the prime minister. Life peerages are usually offered to those nearing the end of a distinguished career.

## The law lords

The House of Lords is still the highest court of appeal for all cases except Scottish criminal cases. Only 30 lords play any part in this work. Ten are judges who have been given a special sort of life peerage to enable them to hear cases in the House of Lords. They are called lords of appeal in ordinary. The rest of the law lords are judges who hold (or have held) high office and either happen to be hereditary peers anyway or have been made life peers because of their distinguished careers. There are always a couple of law lords who are experts in Scottish law as Scotland has its own legal system.

## Parliamentary terms

Whips – this term was first used in the 18th century when it was likened to the hunting field and it was the person who 'whipped-in' the hounds to keep them all together. Whips keep their parties together.

Hansard – this is a word-for-word account of what is said each day in the House of Commons.

Back-benchers – MPs who belong to the same party as the government but who do not hold a government post.

Front-benchers – government ministers sit on the front bench of the government side of the chamber. They are therefore known as government front-benchers.

In the chamber of the House of Commons, the government sits to the right of the speaker's chair and the opposition to the left. On the opposition front bench sit the official opposition spokesmen. The senior spokesmen are referred to as the shadow cabinet because they shadow the work of the government.

## Public admission to Parliament

The public are admitted to the Strangers Gallery of the chamber for debates, but not Prime Minister's Question Time, when Parliament is in session. Queuing starts early at St. Stephen's Entrance, opposite Westminster Abbey, for debates which take place from 2:30 p.m. - late Mondays - Thursdays; from 9:30 a.m. - 2 p.m. Wednesdays; and from 9:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. Fridays. These times are approximate. Official tours have to be arranged through the office of a member of Parliament.



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